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How Trump's funding freeze affected AZ families, community partners who rely on Head Start

KJZZ | By **Sam Dingman**

Published February 6, 2025 at 12:21 PM MST



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Matthew Casey/KJZZ

A Head Start teacher helps a child build with toy magnets during student free time at the preschool.

When the Trump administration issued a surprising order freezing federal funding last week, many organizations who rely on that funding were stunned. One such organization was Head Start, an education and child care program that's been running since the late 1960's.

Jessica Rivera-Garcia, executive director of the Arizona Head Start Association, said she had a front-row seat to the chaos the order created before it was abruptly

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All Things Considered



Jessica Rivera-Garcia

Jessica Rivera-Garcia

Full conversation

JESSICA RIVERA-GARCIA: Head Start promotes school readiness for children from low income and at-risk families. We provide early childhood education, health services, nutrition, and parent involvement opportunities to support the development of children ages 0 to 5. We focus on helping children develop social, cognitive and emotional skills, preparing them to be successful in school. And the program also includes support for families, such as parenting resources and connecting them with other community services.

SAM DINGMAN: Wow, so it's, it's very comprehensive. It's not just focus on the kids themselves. It seems like it's a really broad based effort.

RIVERA-GARCIA: Correct. We are our two generation approach. We believe that helping the families be successful in their life, and as well as supporting the children, we can help them both be successful, and have a, yeah, a successful life.

DINGMAN: And do you have an estimate of how many kids Arizona Head Start has impacted?

RIVERA-GARCIA: Yes. So we served for our 2025 Head Start profile for the state of Arizona. We provided to around 17,000 children.

DINGMAN: And where does Arizona Head Start get their funding from?

RIVERA-GARCIA: We receive funding from the federal government, from the Health and Human Services Department.

DINGMAN: So that sort of leads us to the news peg for this conversation. Give us a sense of what's been going on with Head Start nationally in the last couple of weeks and, and what the impact has been on Arizona Head Start in particular.

big concern.

DINGMAN: We're talking about a period of what, about 36 hours or so. How long was it?

RIVERA-GARCIA: Yes, like you, like you mentioned, it was, Yeah, around 36 hours or so that, that Tuesday, Wednesday, before that rescinded. So, so yeah, so we were in constant communication with our national and regional partners, trying to make sure that we had the most updated and current information to provide to our Head Start programs and then of course, Head Start programs were reaching out to us letting us know if they had any issues, accessing the portal.

DINGMAN: Yeah. So this portal that Head Start programs access to get federal funding. Just to kind of give people a concrete sense of what it would have been like to work at a Head Start facility and think you're going about your normal business of the day and realize that things have been disrupted. Is it, it's just like a website that you log into and then what happens?

RIVERA-GARCIA: You log in and you're able to basically request a drawdown on how much you're requesting and then you're supposed to get it like be approved or not of that request, and then you get the funds. So what was happening was that either the system was like the system is down or that your request to draw funds is still processing or pending.

DINGMAN: Right, and this is the kind of thing that presumably on a normal day, there's no hitch.

RIVERA-GARCIA: Correct. They would just have requested the funds and then it would have been approved. And then they will get the funds.

DINGMAN: Can you give us an example of the kind of impact that a family might feel if services were disrupted?

RIVERA-GARCIA: It will greatly impact, you know, the, their, their life. It can affect a family to be able to go to work that day because they rely on our program to provide the service for the child while they're at work. So having to find someone, something at last minute might be detrimental and they might have to call off work because they don't have anyone that they trust to care for their child.

DINGMAN: Yeah. I don't know if this is something you can talk about, but just to ask, I know that part of the short-lived order was related to what the president calls, I believe, wokeness, was that something that created concern in the conversations you had during that brief period where the funding was frozen?

RIVERA-GARCIA: When that happened, that was not the first thing we thought it was gonna be about. You know, when the freeze happened, we, it was not like a correlation of like, oh it's because of the DEI. It was more like, oh my gosh, it, it, what, what is happening? We need funds, like what Head Start is important, like we need to have it. It

DINGMAN: I see. Well, so obviously, as you were just explaining, this was a very intense 36 hour period where there was a tremendous amount of uncertainty. The order was rescinded, but the future seems uncertain. How has this affected your long term planning? What are you keeping an eye out for in the days and weeks ahead?

RIVERA-GARCIA: So, the HSA program has a legacy of positive outcomes, you know, including socioeconomic benefits for recipients in the community, and one of the things that we are going to keep doing is working very closely with state leaders throughout shared advocacy with our regional and community partners.

I think that's one of the ways that we're gonna continue working closely together, making sure that we continue expanding the awareness of, you know, what Head Start is, the positive impact that we are making on the community, so trying to make. You know, our programs be seen as as what we are, which is a vital service for our community.

DINGMAN: So the, the, it sounds like the plan is to just make sure that the lines of communication are open and the work and the impact that the work has is very clear to local stakeholders, because it seems like it's gonna be difficult to make any sort of prediction about what's gonna happen at the federal level.

RIVERA-GARCIA: Correct.

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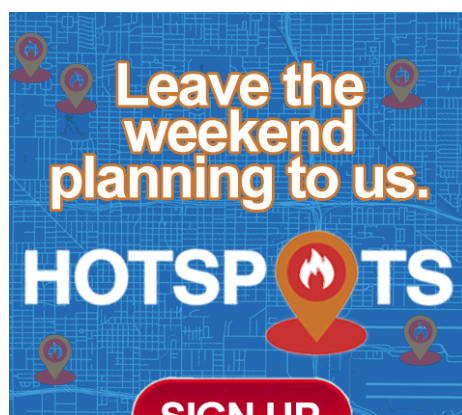
Sam Dingman

Sam Dingman is a reporter and host for KJZZ's The Show. Prior to KJZZ, Dingman was the creator and host of the acclaimed podcast Family Ghosts.

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The order came in response to a memo released by the Office of Management and Budget last week directing agencies to freeze funding for federal grants and other programs.



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